



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Brunei

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafeite sect of that religion: Provided that all other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony by the person professing them in any part of Brunei Darussalam"; however, the Government imposes many restrictions on non-Shafeite and non-Islamic religious practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Practitioners of non-Muslim faiths are not allowed to proselytize, and Christian-based schools must give instruction in Islam to all students and are not allowed to teach Christianity. The Government uses a range of municipal and planning laws and other legislation to restrict the expansion of religions other than official Islam. Six of the seven persons detained in 2003 for attempting to revive the banned Al-Arqam movement were released in July 2004, and the seventh was released on May 23, 2005, after undergoing "rehabilitation," swearing an oath of allegiance to the Sultan, and accepting a "return to the correct path and teachings of Islam."

In December 2004, the Government, for the first time, sponsored the participation of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim religious officials at an international conference on interfaith cooperation.

The country's various religious groups coexist peacefully, but ecumenical interaction is hampered by the dominant Islamic religious ethos, which discourages Muslims from learning about other faiths and forbids persons of other faiths from proselytizing. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of activities to explain and propagate Islam, and they also offer financial incentives, housing, and new mosques for converts to Islam.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy supported religious freedom through a number of programs, including an Embassy-sponsored Iftar, visiting speakers, selection of a Fulbright recipient, and dialogue with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 2,200 square miles, and its population is an estimated 360,000. The Government does not publish detailed data on religious affiliation; however, other sources indicate that 67 percent of the population is Muslim, 13 percent is Buddhist, 10 percent is Christian, and another 10 percent adheres to indigenous beliefs or other faiths. An estimated 16 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, of which approximately half is Christian (Anglicans, Catholics, and Methodists) and half is Buddhist. There also is a large workforce composed mainly of Australian, British, Filipino, South Asian, Indonesian, and Malaysian expatriates that includes Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.

There are 101 mosques and prayer halls, 7 Christian churches, several Chinese temples, and 2 Hindu temples in the country.

Proselytizing by faiths other than the officially sanctioned branch of Islam is not permitted. There are no missionaries working in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution states, "The religion of Brunei Darussalam shall be the Muslim religion according to the Shafeite sect of that religion: Provided that all other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony by the person professing them in any part of Brunei Darussalam"; however, the Government imposes many restrictions on non-Islamic religions and non-Shafeite practitioners.

The Government describes the country as a Malay Islamic monarchy. The Government actively promotes adherence by its

Muslim residents to Islamic values and traditions. The Ministry of Religious Affairs deals solely with Islam and Islamic laws, which exist alongside secular laws and apply only to Muslims.

In January 2005, the Government introduced legislation under the Societies Order that replaced the Societies Act. As did the act, the order compels all organizations, including religious groups not specifically mentioned in the Constitution, to register. The order also requires organizations to name all members. An organization that fails to register can face charges of unlawful assembly and be fined. Individuals who participate in or influence others to join unregistered organizations can be fined, arrested, and imprisoned. Approval to register is at the discretion of the Registrar of Societies or Commissioner of Police and may be refused for any reason.

The Government continued to use zoning laws that prohibit the use of private homes as places of worship, and in 2003, it denied permission to two Christian religious groups to register and worship collectively.

While the country has several Chinese temples, only the temple in the capital is registered officially. The other temples have not faced charges for failing to register, but they are not allowed to organize functions and celebrations.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Since the early 1990's, the Government has reinforced the legitimacy of the hereditary monarchy and the observance of traditional and Muslim values by asserting a national ideology known as the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, the genesis of which reportedly dates from the 15th century. MIB principles have been adopted as the basis for government, and all meetings and ceremonies commence with a Muslim prayer. At citizenship ceremonies, non-Muslims must wear national dress, which includes Muslim head coverings for men and women.

Despite constitutional provisions providing for the full and unconstrained exercise of religious freedom, the Government restricted the practice of non-Muslim religions by prohibiting proselytizing of Muslims; occasionally denying entry to foreign clergy or particular priests, bishops, or ministers; banning the importation of religious teaching materials or scriptures such as the Bible; and refusing permission to expand, repair, or build churches, temples, or shrines. The Government allows only the practice of the official Shafeite school of Islam. It has banned several other religious groups that it considers deviant, including the radical Islamic Al-Arqam movement as well as the Baha'i Faith; however, the Government did not ban any new groups during the period covered by this report. Citizens deemed to have been influenced by the teachings of such groups (usually students returning from overseas study) have been "shown the error of their ways" in study seminars organized by mainstream Islamic religious leaders. The Government readily investigated and took proscriptive action against purveyors of radical Islam or "deviationist" Islamic groups. The Government periodically warned the population about "outsiders" preaching radical Islamic fundamentalist or unorthodox beliefs and warned Muslims against Christian evangelists, most recently in May 2005 during a sermon at the national mosque.

A 1964 fatwa issued by the State Mufti strongly discourages Muslims from assisting non-Muslim organizations in perpetuating their faiths, and it reportedly has been used by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to influence other government authorities either to deny non-Muslim religious organizations permission for a range of religious and administration activities or to fail to respond to applications from these groups. Nonetheless, Christian churches and their associated schools have been allowed, for safety reasons, to repair, expand, and renovate buildings on their sites and to carry out minor building works.

The sole official Chinese temple must obtain permission for seasonal religious events and could not organize processions outside the bounds of its half-acre site. Christian organizations are subjected to the same restrictions on processions. However, in 2005, the Government permitted Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations outside the grounds of the Chinese temple.

The Government routinely censors magazine articles on other faiths, blacking out or removing photographs of crucifixes and other Christian religious symbols. Government officials also guard against the distribution and sale of items that feature photographs viewed as undesirable or religious symbols.

The Government requires residents to carry an identity card that states the bearer's religion. The Government also asks visitors to identify their religion on their landing cards, although many people do not comply and have not been challenged.

During the period covered by this report, conservative Islam appeared to be gaining in influence, grounded in government plans to incorporate the country's civil law into an overarching Shari'a Islamic code; however, the incorporation was not complete. Authorities enforced Shari'a regulations, such as arresting 46 Muslims in April 2004 for not performing Friday prayers. Thirty-two of those arrested were foreigners working in the country. The offenders were fined and later released. There have been no further arrests for this reason. However, authorities continued to arrest persons for other offenses under Shari'a law, such as "khalwat" (close proximity between the sexes) and consumption of alcohol. The arresting forces in these crackdowns were comprised of civilian and religious police. Most of those arrested or detained for a first offense were fined and released, although in the past, some persons were imprisoned for up to 4 months for repeated offenses of khalwat.

Religious authorities regularly participated in raids to confiscate alcoholic beverages and non-halal meats. They also monitored restaurants and supermarkets to ensure conformity with halal practice. Restaurants and service employees that served a Muslim in daylight hours during the fasting month were subjected to fines.

The Ministry of Education requires courses on Islam and the MIB in all schools. School textbooks are illustrated to promote Islam as the norm, with all women and girls shown wearing the Muslim head covering. There are no depictions of the people or practices of other religions. The ministry prohibits the teaching of other religions and comparative religious studies. Private mission schools are required to give instruction about Islam and are not allowed to give Christian instruction. The ministry requires that all students, including non-Muslims, follow a course of study on the Islamic faith and learn the jawi (Arabic script). The International School of Brunei, the Jerudong International School, and the Panaga School are the only schools exempt from this regulation. In January 2004, under its integrated education plan to combine religious and academic education, the ministry introduced a pilot program in 38 government primary schools that requires the compulsory study of Arabic by all students. In March 2005, the ministry announced plans to compel all non-Muslim students to take a further course in Islamic knowledge.

The Government did not prohibit or restrict parents from giving religious instruction to children in their own homes.

Religious authorities encouraged Muslim women to wear the tudong, a traditional head covering, and many women did so. In government schools and at higher institutes of learning, Muslim and non-Muslim female students must wear Muslim attire, including a head covering as a part of their "uniform." Muslim male students are expected to wear the songkok (hat). There also are reports that non-Muslim women teachers at public schools are sometimes pressured by government officials or colleagues to wear Muslim attire including the tudong.

In accordance with Qur'anic precepts, women are denied equal status with men in a number of important areas such as divorce, inheritance, and custody of children. In accordance with the 2002 amendment to the Brunei Nationality Act, citizenship can now be transmitted through the mother as well as through the father.

Marriage between Muslims and those of other faiths is not permitted under Brunei Islamic law, and non-Muslims must "voluntarily" convert to Islam if they wish to marry a Muslim. Muslims cannot convert to the religion of their non-Muslim marriage partner.

Muslims who wish to change their religion face considerable difficulties. Those born Muslim face official and societal pressure not to leave Islam. Permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs must be obtained, and there were no reports of anyone requesting such permission. There were instances during the period covered by this report of persons, often foreign women, who converted to Islam as a prelude to marrying Muslims. If the marriages took place, these women faced intense official pressure not to return to their former religions or faced extraordinary delays in obtaining permission to do so. There also were known cases of divorced Muslim converts who, because of official and societal pressure, remained officially Muslim although they preferred to revert to their former faiths.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In general, those adhering to faiths other than Islam are allowed to practice their beliefs, provided that they exercise restraint and do not proselytize. Non-Muslims who proselytized have in the past been arrested or detained and sometimes held without charges for extended periods of time; however, no such arrests or detentions occurred during the period covered by this report. Agents of the Internal Security Department monitored religious services at Christian churches, and senior church members believed that they were under intermittent surveillance.

In September 2003, the Government used the Internal Security Act to detain seven members of the banned radical Al-Arqam movement. The Government warned its citizens against involvement in any group that practices teachings that "deviate" from the country's official religion. The six were released in July 2004 and the seventh in May 2005.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. However, it is an accepted practice for the children of parents converting to Islam to be converted to Islam as well. There were reports in the past of teenage children who refused such conversion despite family and official pressure.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In late 2004, the Government, for the first time, sponsored the participation of Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim religious officials from the country in an interfaith conference held in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. This concession to interfaith dialogue was not reported in either state-run television or in the local print media. Junior diplomatic officials represented the Government at the funeral of Pope John Paul II, and a senior government official signed a condolence book at the Brunei Catholic diocese.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The country's various religious groups coexist peacefully, but ecumenical interaction is hampered by the dominant Islamic religious ethos, which discourages Muslims from learning about other faiths. At the same time, Islamic authorities organize a range of "dakwah" or proselytizing activities and incentives to explain and propagate Islam. Among the incentives to converts, especially those from the indigenous communities in rural areas, are monthly financial assistance, new homes, electric generators, and water pumps. The religious authority also builds mosques and prayer halls for converts in these areas but will not allow the construction of churches or other non-Muslim houses of worship.

The country's national philosophy, the MIB concept, discourages open-mindedness to religions other than Islam, and there are no programs to promote understanding of other religions. The country's indigenous people generally convert either to Islam or Christianity but rarely to Buddhism. More than 100 indigenous persons converted to Christianity during the period covered by this report, and several hundred or more converted to Islam. Consequently, Muslim officials view Christianity as the main rival to official Islam. Other than their joint participation at the December 2004 Jogjakarta conference on interfaith dialogue, there has been no reported dialogue between government officials and Christian and Buddhist leaders.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy has increased contacts and dialogue with government officials and representatives of all religious organizations. In November 2004, the U.S. Ambassador hosted the first ever interfaith Iftar to mark the breaking of the Ramadan fast. The Embassy began a program of visiting speaker programs, the second of which was hosted in May 2005 and focused on myths surrounding Islamic terrorist groups, which served to open discussion with senior Religious Affairs representatives and legal officials. The Embassy also selected a Fulbright grant recipient, the first to undertake a graduate program in Islamic Studies and Comparative Religions in the United States. Embassy representatives continued to press the Government to adhere to the spirit of its Constitution and its declarations on human rights.

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